

SOME ASPECTS OF VEDIC VIṢṆU *

Vaiṣṇavism is one of the major religions of India centring around the worship of any one of the forms or aspects of Viṣṇu, whose antiquity is traceable to the Vedic literature and also to the non-Aryan or the pre-Aryan sources according to some.

He is one of the important gods of the Vedic mythology, even though he occupies a subordinate position from the statistical point of view¹ i.e. to say « the statistical standard makes him out to be a deity of the fourth rank »², because « he is celebrated in not more than five whole hymns and in parts of others, while his name occurs only about a hundred times in the Ṛgveda »³ (= RV), but he is « a deity of capital importance in the mythology of the Brāhmaṇas »⁴. In the Hindu classical mythology he occupies « the prominent position of the supreme god »⁵, while his name is prominently preserved in the Hindu trinity of the gods and in the philosophical literature he is elevated to the rank of

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1. Vide A. A. MACDONELL, *The Vedic Mythology* (1971), p. 37.

2. R. N. DANDEKAR, *Viṣṇu in the Veda, Vedic Mythological Tracts*, (1979), p. 68.

3. R. N. DANDEKAR, *op. cit.*, p. 68; vide also A. A. MACDONELL, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

4. A. A. MACDONELL, *op. cit.*, p. 37, vide also J. GONDA, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism* (1969), p. 1.

5. R. N. DANDEKAR, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

Brahman or the Absolute. In the light of the paramount importance and status enjoyed by him it is quite intriguing to explain away the situation of a god being minor on the statistical grounds rising to an elevation — say in the words of R. N. Dandekar: « the god of ever increasing importance »⁶. It is, therefore, quite reasonable to assume that Viṣṇu was an important deity — an « all important deity »⁷, but the unliked « elements were suppressed, perhaps, consciously by the Vedic poets and priests », as observed by R. N. Dandekar⁸. In this connection it is significant to note that his name occurs 100 times in the RV.

One of the important features of the Viṣṇu-mythology is his three strides which « form the foundation of the Paurāṇic Vāmana-avatāra »⁹. In the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* (1.1.2.13; 1.9.3.9; 3.6.3.3.; 1.2.5.1-7) we have separate references to *trivikramaṇa* and the Vāmana-form¹⁰. The outstanding characteristic of the « three strides »¹¹ is Viṣṇu's pervasiveness of the whole universe and that of the Dwarf-incarnation is Viṣṇu's capacity to enlarge himself and pervade the whole universe.

It is quite well-known that the later Indian literature provides a key to the understanding of the Vedic literature, as observed by Karl F. Geldner and R. Pischel¹² and this echoes in different words

6. R. N. DANDEKAR, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

7. R. N. DANDEKAR, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

8. R. N. DANDEKAR, *op. cit.*, p. 69. On the origin of Viṣṇu vide J. GONDA, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 ff.

9. R. N. DANDEKAR, *op. cit.*, p. 81. The origin and development of the legend of the Vāmana-avatāra is studied by GAYA CHARAN TRIPATHI in his *Der Ursprung und die Entwicklung der Vāmana Legende in der indischen Literatur*, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1968. On the symbolic meaning of Vāmana vide V. S. AGRAWALA, *Matsya-Purāṇa - A Study* (1963), pp. 306 ff.

10. Vide G. C. TRIPATHI, *Vaidika Devatā* (Hindī), 1982, pp. 315 ff; on the dwarf-form vide J. GONDA, *op. cit.*, pp. 145 ff., on three strides, *ibid.*, pp. 55 ff.

11. On three strides of Viṣṇu in the Vedic literature vide F. B. J. KUIPER, *The three strides of Viṣṇu*, in « Indological Studies in Honour of W. Norman Brown », (American Oriental Series, Volume 47, edited by Ernest Bender), pp. 137 ff.

12. Vide M. WINTERNITZ, *History of Indian Literature*, Volume I, p. 72; vide also S. G. KANTAWALA, *Two Legends from the Purāṇas: A Study in Upa-bṛ̥h̥ṇaṇa*, in IT, 8-9 (1980-81) Dr. Ludwik Sternbach commemoration Volume, (Torino, Italy), pp. 215-216; cf. *itihāsa-purāṇābhyāṃ vedāṃ samupabṛ̥h̥ṇhayet/Mbh* (Cr. Ed.), 1.1.204; *ātmā purāṇaṃ vedānām/Skanda-Purāṇa, Revākhaṇḍa*, 1.2.2; *sarva-veda-vedāṅga - śāstrāṇāṃ sārabhūtam/Nāradya-Purāṇa*, 1.1.21.

the Mahābhāratan principle of *upabr̥ṇhaṇa* i.e. to say the Vedas should be interpreted and explained with the help of *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇas*, — of course, one may add here —, cautiously without counter-running the general principles of Vedic interpretation. It is, therefore, proposed in this paper to discuss some of the Vedic aspects of Viṣṇu's three strides in the light of their Purāṇic counterparts and also to refer to some other aspects of the Vedic Viṣṇu which contribute towards the development of the later philosophical and sectarian principles.

The RV, the earliest document of the OIA literature, gives the following picture of Viṣṇu's three strides:

Viṣṇu, who is *urugāya* and *urukrama* possesses the heroic powers and he measures out the terrestrial regions. He establishes the upper long far extended gathering place. He has measured out this gathering place with his three steps. These three steps are filled with mead. He has supported the heaven and earth and all beings triply i.e. by taking three steps. His third step is said to be in the light of heaven¹³.

This makes it clear that Viṣṇu takes three steps and measures out the earth (*pṛthivī*), mid-region (*antarikṣa*), heaven (*dyo*) and all living beings. The Ṛgvedic poet goes on to describe that when a mortal beholds the two steps of him, he is restless with amaze

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13. Vide: Viṣṇor nū kaṁ vīryāṇi prā vocaṁ
 yāḥ pāṛthivāni vimamé rājāṁsi/
 yó āskambhāyad úttaraṁ sadhástham
 vicakramāṇás tredhórugāyāḥ// RV 1.154.1
 yásyorúṣu triṣú vikramāṇeṣv
 adhikṣiyánti bhúvanāni víśvā/ RV 1.154.2 cd
 prā Viṣṇave śūśám etu mánma
 girikṣíta urugāyāya vṛṣṇé/
 yá idāṁ dīrghāṁ práyataṁ sadhástham
 éko vimamé tribhír it padébbhiḥ // RV 1.154.3
 yásya trī purṇā mādhunā padāny
 ākṣiyamāṇā svadhāyā mādanti /
 yá u tridhātu pṛthivīm utá dyām-
 éko dādadhāra bhúvanāni víśvā // RV 1.154.4
 yó rājāṁsi vimamé pāṛthivāni / RV 6.49.13
 cf: yāḥ pāṛthivāni vimame sa rājāṁsi martyaḥ /
 kiṁ jāyamāna uta jāta upaiti martya
 ityāha mantradṛg ṛṣiḥ puruṣasya yasya // BhP 8.23.29 b-d
 tṛtīyam ādhi rocané divāḥ / RV 1.155, 3-a; cf. RV 1.154.6

and moreover he is described as developing fast in form and as no more a child ¹⁴.

These three steps are referred to in other *Samhitās* and later Vedic and ritual literature ¹⁵.

From the very early times we find attempts by ancient Indian writers to interpret the three strides, when they tried to interpret the problem of the nature of the Vedic deities. Śākapūṇi, who is quoted in Yāska's *Nirukta* (12.19), holds the view that the three steps refer to the earth, mid-region and heaven. Macdonell and Bergaigne also accept this view ¹⁶.

The *Purāṇas*, e.g. the *Matsya-Purāṇa* (= MP) (chs. 244ff.), *Brahma-Purāṇa* (= BP) (ch. 73), *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (= BhP) (8.18ff.) refer to the triple striding. In the MP, which is one of the earliest *Purāṇas*, Viṣṇu, who is described as the *māyāvāmanarūpadhṛk* (246.37), asks for *padatraya* to Bali in preference to gold, villages, gems etc., which he is prepared to give him in gift. At this juncture there is a little higgling between Bali and his minister Śukra on the issue of accepting or otherwise of Vāmana's demand. Ultimately, after disregarding Śukra's advice the moment the water is poured by Bali in the hand, he shows him his *sarvadevamayarūpa*. He enlarges his body (*mahākāya*) and measures out the earth, conquers the three worlds and gives the *Sutala* to Bali (246.66ff.). Note the use of forms *vikramaṇa* and *vikramataḥ* (246.67) parallel to the Vedic forms *vicakramāṇaḥ* (RV. 1.154.1.), *vikramaṇeṣu* (RV. 1.154.2). Vāmana is addressed with the Ṛgvedic epithets *urugāya* and *urukrama* in the BhP (8.17.25). He is also described as *viśva-kāya* (BhP. 8.19.33) and *mahat-kāya* (BhP. 8.19.34) comparable to the Ṛgvedic *bṛhāccharīro vimīmāṇaḥ* (1.155.6). He asks for three steps only (cf. BhP 8.19.19, 22, 27, 20.24; 21.4; 20.33, 34). He is foretold by Śukra that he would stride the earth in his first step, the heaven (*divam*) with his second step and the sky with his gigantic body and then the question is what to

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14. *dvé id asya krāmaṇe swardṛśo*
'bhikhyāya mārtyo bhuraṇyati / RV 1.155.5 ab
bṛhāccharīro vimīmāṇa ṛkva-
bhir yuvākumāraḥ prāty éty āhavām // RV 1.155.6 cd
15. Vide G. C. TRIPATHI, *ibid.*, pp. 315 ff.
16. Vide A. A. MACDONELL, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

talk of the third step, *i.e.* to say the third step is a problem. In confirmation of Śukra's foretelling the BhP (8.20.33-34; 8.21.29-31) narrates that he strode over the earth with his first step, the *nabhas* (sky) and quarters (*diśaḥ*) with his body and hands respectively and the heaven with his second step and then was left nothing for his third step. And hence in order to keep his solemn promise Bali offered as a place for his third step his own head which he accepted (BhP 8.22.2, 32-35) and with it Bali was sent to *Sutala* (8.23.3).

It is important to note here that in the MP and the BhP it is the first two stridings that cover up the earth and heaven, whereas according to the Vedic version it is the third striding that measures out the heaven and also that it is in his three steps that all the worlds and created beings are contained.

According to the Ṛgvedic version the third step is the highest one, beyond the ken of birds and beyond the reach of any one and where there is well of mead (RV. 1.154.5). Moreover, according to the Ṛgvedic version, a mortal is restless, when he sees his two steps (RV. 1.155.5). It is quite tempting to correlate here the BhP-account, *viz.* Bali is restless, when the second step-striding is done by Viṣṇu, because it is then the question of the third step. According to the BhP-version it appears that the second step is the highest, because it covers up all that is covered up in the three steps of Viṣṇu according to the Ṛgvedic version. In contrast to the Vedic version the MP as well as the BhP find *Sutala* as the venue for the third step, because it is quite in conformity with the change that had taken place in the concept of the divisions of the cosmos with the passage of time. According to the Vedic mythology the universe is divided into three divisions, *viz.* earth, air and heaven¹⁷. With the march of time the concept of nether region developed and in order to accommodate this concept the Purāṇakāra expands the Vedic concept of mid-region and included Pātāla in the third striding. Thus the third step of the Purāṇic version takes a different position and direction maintaining at the same time the complete coverage of the entire cosmos in the

17. Vide A. A. MACDONELL, *op. cit.*, p. 8, cf. RV. 2.12.2.

three stridings. This change reflects upon the dynamism of Purāṇic mythology. The three steps suggests the pervasive aspect of Viṣṇu¹⁸. In this connection it will not be out of place to refer here to the derivation of the vocable *viṣṇu*. The MP derives it from $\sqrt{viś}$, when it says that he is so called, because he has entered the universe, from $vi + \sqrt{sta(m)bh}$, when it says that he has supported the universe and from $vi + \sqrt{āp}$, when it says that he has pervaded the universe and also from $pra + \sqrt{bhū}$, when his pervasiveness is referred as due to his extensiveness¹⁹. The etymology is much discussed and the Indian tradition derives it from $\sqrt{viś}$, to enter, $\sqrt{viś}$, to pervade, \sqrt{vicch} , to be shining or $vi + \sqrt{aś}$ to reach, attain, fill, penetrate²⁰. Some western scholars derive it from $\sqrt{viś}$, to be active²¹. This brings to refer to the use of \sqrt{kram} in the Vedic and Purāṇic²² versions.

The foregoing discussion amply shows how the Vedic ideas of Viṣṇu's stridings and pervasiveness are enlarged upon by the Vāmana-legend, wherein Viṣṇu in his dwarf-form magnifies himself and becomes co-extensive. Another point to be noted is that the original idea of triple strides comes to be welded together with Viṣṇu's dwarf-form which is referred to in the *Satapatha-Brahmana* and elsewhere to develop the mythology of Viṣṇu.

18. Vide J. GONDA, *op. cit.*, Preface, p. i.

19. Cf. *jagadvīṣṭambhanāc caiva Viṣṇur eveti kīrtiyase / viṣṭabhya tiṣṭhase nityaṁ trailokyam sacārācaram //*
vyāptāṁ tavaiva viśatā trailokam sacārācaram /
tasmād Viṣṇur iti proktaḥ svayam eva svayambhuvā //
viṣṭabdhām yat tvayā sarvaṁ jagat sthāvarajaṅgamam //

MP 248.39-42

prabhavād api tad vyāptyā Viṣṇutvam agamat punaḥ / MP 2.30
Pra + \sqrt{bhū}, be extensive etc. (vide A. A. MACDONELL, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary*, p. 207; V. S. APTE, *The Students' Sanskrit Dictionary*, p. 365). For similar Purāṇic derivations vide G. C. TRIPATHI, *op. cit.*, p. 302; J. GONDA, *ibid.*, pp. 64 ff., S. G. KANTAWALA, *Cultural History from the Matsya-Purāṇa* (1963/64), p. 156.

20. Vide G. C. TRIPATHI, *op. cit.*, pp. 301 ff; S. G. KANTAWALA, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

21. A. A. MACDONELL, *The Vedic Mythology*, p. 39. For its non-Aryan connection vide G. C. TRIPATHI, *ibid.*, pp. 305 ff.

22. Cf. RV 1.154.1, 2, etc., BhP 8.19.33; 8.20.34; 21.29.34; vide also J. GONDA, *op. cit.*, pp. 62 ff.

In the RV we meet with the passages which delineate the functional trasference. It is Indra who is said to support the heaven and earth²³. This function of supporting the heaven and earth is also described in connection with Viṣṇu in some passages²⁴.

This functional trasference may be interpreted as a compromise between the growing Viṣṇu-religion and the Indra-religion, when the Varuṇa-religion was superseded by the Indra-religion. In the later literature e.g. in the BhP we come across the *Govardhana-dhāraṇalīlā* episode, the central theme of which is Kṛṣṇa's supporting the mountain on the tip of his finger and rescuing the people from Indra's wrath incarnated as torrential and flooding rains. This act of supporting the mountain finds its prototype in Viṣṇu's supporting the heaven. This episode may well be taken as a « mythological reflection of the historical contest between the Vedic religion on the one hand and the newly developed popular Bhāgavata religion on the other »²⁵, specifically it depicts Kṛṣṇa's ascendancy²⁶.

Another Vedic aspect viz. alliance between Indra and Viṣṇu and Viṣṇu being helped by Indra or Indra performing certain acts is reflected in a reverse direction in the *Purāṇas*, when, for example, in the BhP it is said that Viṣṇu-Upendra gains back Indra's lost kingdom and re-instals him in his place. This may be interpreted as a relic of ascendancy of Viṣṇuism-Kṛṣṇaism over Indraism.

It will not be out of place to mention here a reference to Vāmana's temple also. The MP 244.3 refers to the temple of Vā-

23. Cf. *yó dyām ástabhnāt sa janāsa Indráh* / RV 2.12.2^a
avanśé dyām astabhāyad bṛhāntam
ā ródasī aprṇad antárikṣam / RV 2.15.2 ab

24. *yáḥ pāṛthivāni vimamé rájāṁsi* /
yó áskabhāyad úttaram sadhástham / RV 1.154.1 bc

25. R. N. DANDEKAR, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

26. For the discussion of the *Govardhana-dhāraṇa-līlā*-episode vide S. G. KANTAWALA, *Some Remarks on the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, in « Journal of the M.S. University of Baroda », Vol. XIV (1975) No. 1, pp. 41-48.

27. F. B. J. KUIPER, *ibid.*, p. 142.

mana in the city of Kurukṣetra²⁸ as flourishing in the days of Pāṇḍavas and in this context V. R. R. Dikshitar remarks that « once there seems to have been prevalent the practice of worshipping god in all his manifestations. We hear of the special temples of Narasiṃha, Vāmana, Vāsudeva, Trivikrama, Varāha, Buddha... »²⁹. Here one is reminded of a temple of Tikamajī³⁰ at Dakor in the Kaira District of the Gujarat State.

In the history of Indian literature we come across a phenomenon of the Vedic ideas being further developed for the later sectarian philosophical concepts and in this connection RV 1.154.6 may be cited here³¹. It says: « we desire to go to the abodes of you two (i.e. Indra and Viṣṇu), where are the many-horned nimble kine: then indeed that highest step of the wide-pacing bull shines brightly down »³². This *ṛk* is quoted by Vallabhācārya and Viṭṭhaleśa to describe their concept of Gokula and Vallabhācārya brings out that the pleasures of enjoyment with Brahman are not to be found in the Vaikuṇṭha, but they are to be found in Gokula which is the highest place and the phrase « the abodes of you two » is interpreted by them as referring to Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma³³.

28. Professor R. N. Mehta kindly informs me on the basis of his archaeological survey of Kurukshetra that there are a number of Vāmana-temples in the Kurukshetra-region.

29. V. R. R. DIKSHITAR, *The Matsya-Purāṇa: A Study* (1935), p. 66.

30. On Viṣṇu and Trivikrama vide BANERJEE JITENDRA NATH, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (1956), pp. 234, 411, 417 ff.

31. *tā vān vāstūny uśmasi gāmadhyai*
yātra gāvo bhūriśṛṅgā ayāsaḥ /
ātrāha tād urugāyāsyā vṛṣṇaḥ
paramāṇ padām āva bhāti bhūri // RV 1.154.6

32. A. A. MACDONELL, *A Vedic Reader*, (1954), p. 35.

33. For details vide S. G. KANTAWALA, RV. 1.154.6: *A Study in Sectarian Interpretation*, in « Baladeva Upadhyaya Felicitation Volume », 1983, pp. 69-76.